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ABSTRACT

This article, in the form of an interview, deals with the status and expected future of foreign language programs in the nations schools and colleges, and in particular, Virginia's. Despite hearsay, enrollment in foreign language has remained fairly constant in Virginia high schools. French and Spanish have the highest enrollments, followed by German, although French has lost more than 20 percent of its enrollment. Russian enrollment has not obvious pattern and Latin is declining. In colleges and universities, enrollments were noticeably affected by relaxation of language requirements, although many schools still maintain a language requirement for entrance. Negative reports about declining foreign language programs are overstated, mostly because of the decline in French in urban language programs, which are losing academically oriented students to the suburbs, and because of the priority on basic subjects. Changing trends in public attitudes and in business should affect foreign language study in a positive way, however. A growing spirit of nationalism in other countries is leading to increased use of language other than English for international business negotiations. Acceptance of languages other than English in the United States and improvement in the quality of instruction are also sources of encouragement. The article concludes with some advice to students and a brief discussion of the changes in recent years in FL teaching methodology and the challenges facing FL teachers today. (CLK)

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Foreign Languages: Don't Sell Them Short

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In recent months many questions have arisen concerning the status of foreign languages in the schools and colleges. In this article, Dr. Helen P. Warriner, supervisor of foreign languages for the State Department of Education, responds to some of the more prominent of these questions to inform teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, and other interested individuals on this aspect of the curriculum.

Q. Are enrollments in foreign languages really down in the high schools?

A. Contrary to stories which have appeared in recent months in newspapers and to much hearsay, the percentage of students enrolled in foreign language classes in Virginia high schools has remained reasonably constant during the last 11 years. The following statistics for grades 8-12 indicate this fact.

NUMBER, PERCENTAGE OF PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS ENROLLED IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

Year	Number Of Students	Percentage Of Students
1963-64	92,456	29
1964-65	92,723	27
1965-66	97,664	28
1966-67	104,333	29
1967-68	111,039	30
1968-69	119,226	31
1969-70	118,525	30
1970-71	116,123	28
1971-72	117,896	30
1972-73	113,731	28
1973-74	112,159	28

The percentage of students ranges from 27 to 31 with the high in 1968-69. Since that time it has fluctuated, but has never dropped more than three percentage points. I do not consider this loss a significant one or a matter of major concern.

Q. Do all languages follow the same enrollment trends?

A. Most definitely not. The following table reveals several different patterns.

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NUMBER OF PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS ENROLLED IN CERTAIN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Year	French	Spanish	Latin	German	Russian
1963-64	38,839	29,619	20,994	2,499	505
1964-65	39,339	30,333	18,832	3,724	495
1965-66	43,817	32,103	17,658	3,748	338
1966-67	45,691	36,029	17,061	5,213	339
1967-68	47,954	39,802	16,429	6,296	558
1968-69	49,611	46,761	14,893	7,179	782
1969-70	47,445	50,064	12,867	7,575	574
1970-71	44,411	51,481	11,737	8,012	482
1971-72	43,911	54,132	10,831	8,496	526
1972-73	40,140	53,846	10,184	8,883	644
1973-74	38,261	53,495	9,902	9,264	599

French enrolled the largest number of students in 1968-69, but since that time has lost more than 20 percent of that total. In 1973-74 enrollment totaled slightly more than 38,000 students. On the other hand, Spanish grew constantly during the 11-year period until it tapered off in 1973-74. The loss of a few hundred students from the previous year does not indicate a percentage loss in Spanish, for the total high school population also declined slightly. German has grown rapidly, gaining at least 300 students almost every year.

Latin has been a matter of great concern in that it has lost ground steadily during this period, to the extent that enrollment has been cut by more than half. It is encouraging to note, however, that this decline ceased from 1972-73 to 1973-74. The loss of almost 300 students between those years must be viewed against a declining total school population. Moreover the table does not show that Latin is increasing significantly in some schools. There are instances of growth in this language, but the good news is negated by the loss of programs in some schools whose teachers retire or resign and the course is terminated, usually because it is difficult to find replacements. As for Russian, there are no obvious patterns in the enrollment figures. They are somewhat erratic and have never exceeded 800 students.

Q. What's going on in the colleges?

A. In 1968-69 many U.S. colleges and universities

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underwent a major curriculum reform which led to the omission or relaxation of requirements within degree programs. Subsequently the study of a foreign language was no longer mandatory for students in certain programs. The immediate result was a loss of students. In some instances the loss was as much as 50 percent of the enrollment. Eventually, however, students began to return to foreign language classes of their own accord. Some departments have recovered a large number of the lost students, although most are not back to the level where they were before the degree requirement changes took place. Current information for Virginia colleges and universities, including community colleges, indicates that enrollments are increasing in approximately one third of the institutions and are stable in another third.

While on the subject of requirements, a word should be said about the college foreign language entrance requirements because there is much confusion between these and the degree language requirements. Many people are of the opinion that the colleges do not value languages because they no longer require freshmen to have a high school foreign language background. Current information reveals that approximately half of the four-year schools do have a requirement. Many of those which do not, advise previous study in this area. It should also be noted that many colleges which do not now require foreign language study never did.

Another factor related to this point is that many colleges are scrambling to enroll students to fill dormitories and classrooms. When this happens many requirements tend to be relaxed and sometimes even ignored. They are moving in this direction and there probably will be continued relaxation of both degree and entrance requirements, but this does not mean that the colleges do not value foreign language study.

The requirement changes resulted in needed curriculum and methods reform at the college level. More emphasis is being placed on conversation, and the content of classes is more diverse than previously. These changes, plus the removed psychological barrier that rigid requirements impose, have led to better motivated students, according to many college foreign language instructors.

Q. Then why is there so much bad news concerning foreign language programs?

A. It seems that "bad news" is always more sensational than good news. A recent article in a Virginia newspaper devoted the first two columns to the negative side of a recent foreign language statistical report. Only several paragraphs of the last two columns analyzed some of the positive conclusions.

Also, in some of our larger school systems which once had respected foreign language programs there has been a sharp decrease in the number of students taking languages. This is due to the movement of many of the academically motivated students to the suburbs and to the priorities for basic programs such as reading and vocational subjects. Both of these developments tend to be detrimental to electives, including languages. When this happens in a major city which once had an extensive foreign language program, many persons unknowingly think that the development is representative of all school divisions. The language program might be stable or growing in adjacent localities.

A third factor which has attracted much attention is the rapid loss of students in French. As recently as 1968-69, French was our most popular foreign language. I am convinced that many people believe that all foreign languages are going the way of French or, indeed, of Latin. I reiterate emphatically, in the high schools we have lost only three percent of our students. The essential changes have taken place in the shift of potential French and Latin students to Spanish and German.

Even many foreign language teachers are not fully informed concerning enrollment trends and requirement changes. My office has spent much energy during the last year or so trying to clear up the confusion among our own teachers so that they can assist counselors in advising students knowledgeably and in helping to keep guidance counselors and administrators better informed.

Q. What do you think is the outlook for the role of foreign languages in the curriculum a few years from now?

A. I feel fairly confident that languages will receive greater support from the public, particularly from the business sector. Last fall I heard two speeches by leaders from outside of our own field who corraborated this projection. The lieutenant governor of Indiana predicted that within 10 years it would be difficult to secure many jobs in industries doing business abroad without the knowledge of another language. The vice president of one of the nation's largest pharmaceutical firms approached the matter from a different point of view. He indicated that the growing spirit of nationalism in many countries has caused the business interests in some of them to negotiate in their own language.

In other words, now that the dollar does not speak quite as loudly as it used to, neither is our language as universally accepted. This gentleman indicated that

among the top executives of his company, 20 languages are spoken, and he felt that this competency had assisted them in rising to the top. He also said that his company conducted business in 136 countries in which 80 different languages are spoken. The information provided by these two leaders is related to many similar developments that I see here in Virginia that give me confidence in our future.

The business sector is not the only encouraging source. More Americans are traveling abroad each year, and there is growing interest among them to be able to communicate in other languages. This accounts to a large degree for the rising popularity of adult education conversation courses in foreign languages sponsored by colleges, public schools, and other institutions and commercial establishments.

We have already made great strides toward greater acceptance of languages other than English in our own country. Anyone who has traveled recently knows of the popularity of Spanish in various sections of this country. The United States has the fourth largest Spanish-speaking population in the world. Many public establishments now provide designations and services in Spanish as well as English. A U. S. Supreme Court ruling of January 1974 requires special instruction for students in our schools who do not speak English. We have finally begun to recognize and respect other cultures and languages. In Virginia, courses in English As a Second Language are growing in size and number, and plans are being made for the first bilingual program in Spanish and English to be initiated next year in Arlington County.

Another source of encouragement is the improvement in the quality of instruction in foreign languages. I think the teachers in our foreign language classrooms today are the best that education in the United States has ever been privileged to enjoy. Better proficiency in the language and first-hand acquaintance with the cultures represented contribute to better instruction. If we can improve the methods of instruction to a degree comparable to what has happened in these other areas, I feel that the quality of our programs will improve immeasurably. Attractive and effective instruction draws students.

Although Latin is not a spoken language there seems to be much cause for encouragement in the growth of many individual programs in both high schools and colleges. If we can secure enough teachers to fill the vacancies, the downward trend in enrollment in this language will probably be reversed. In spite of the current curricular focus on the basics and on vocational subjects, there does seem to be some efforts to return to the classics.

Q. What advice should be given students concerning enrolling in foreign language classes?

A. We believe that teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators should keep themselves well informed concerning such developments as those I have described so that they can advise students wisely. Unfortunately, many who have heard only the bad news have sometimes made statements which perhaps do not leave the students with an objective attitude toward enrolling because they give the impression that languages are not important any more. This is not true.

There are many reasons for studying a language. It is first and foremost a means of human communication. To be able to communicate, if only with a few words, opens up opportunities and brings fulfillment that could not otherwise be enjoyed. Greater insight into one's own language is gained, and a new means is provided for the acceptance and appreciation of other cultures.

And let us not forget what the lieutenant governor and the pharmaceutical company vice president had to say. There will very probably be growing alliances between foreign languages and many careers. In the past we have thought of them as leading primarily into teaching, but this is changing. Communication is essential to every profession. If professional pursuits, whatever they are, cross a linguistic boundary, knowledge of the languages on each side of that boundary is helpful or perhaps essential. There is an old saying that if you want to buy a product you can do it in your own language, but if you want to sell something you had better be able to speak the other fellow's language. It seems to me that as we are now in a less privileged economic position in the world we are going to have to use any advantage we can in order to be competitive. Language is one of those advantages.

I would like to point out that Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University has an excellent program in German for students studying architecture. It has grown from a handful of students at the time of its beginning about five years ago to a full-time professor's responsibility at the present time and it is not required. The objective is to give these students basic communication skills with special emphasis on architectural terminology. Most of the classroom topics and projects are architecturally related. It is an exciting program. We are fortunate that one of our Virginia schools pioneered in this development. Other schools are beginning to follow suit with similar interdisciplinary endeavors. There is no better language "relevance" than a program such as this offers.

Q. How should students decide which language to take?

A. Of course, there is always the question: what

language will an individual need? Most students of high school or college age do not know. It does not matter at all what they take, I think. If they have a basis in one language it is much easier to begin another at a later time.

A basic tenet in the philosophy of our foreign language curriculum guide, *Foreign Languages and Foreign Language Learning in Virginia,* is that every high school student should be allowed to take a foreign language if he or she wishes to and everyone should be informed about the advantages of doing so. If proficiency in communicating is the student's objective it will take him a number of years to achieve it. Others can profit from even a year's study. We believe that this is especially important for the students not going to college. They can get linguistic and humanistic perspectives through this means that are not available in other classes.

College students should be informed about the growing opportunities to use languages in other careers. In these days of vigorous job competition, transformation, and obsolescence, it pays to have as many options going for you as possible. The knowledge of a language is an advantageous option. At the same time, students should be advised that the knowledge of language without a primary skill leads almost exclusively to the teaching profession. That is fine if they have decided upon teaching as a career. Even then, however, they should pursue at least two teaching fields—another language or another discipline—so as to have greater employment opportunities.

Q. Language programs used to be based on the study of grammar and literature without too much emphasis on the practical, communication skills which you have been describing. Are they still this way or have they changed to prepare students to be able to use the language to speak or even to read with ease?

A. Individual teachers are found all along the continuum, from those who stress only the mechanics and, if at the college level, literature, to those whose students use the language extensively and can communicate quite well. The majority of teachers have accepted the philosophy of teaching the four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. When they sometimes do not do or do not do well what they espouse, it is usually because it's easier to teach as they were taught; and that too often was the old grammar-literature system, even for some of the younger teachers. There really is not a dichotomy between the old and the new systems. If one is going to be able to read literature with ease and pleasure, the oral skills have to be present to provide the basis, otherwise reading becomes laborious translation. That is why so few people trained by the old system have actually done any reading of the foreign language once they have left the classes. The process is too tedious. In fact, it is not even reading. On the other hand, if the student is able to speak well, he or she has to use grammar accurately, but it has to be functional, not an intellectual exercise.

We have made a lot of progress in methodology. My colleagues and I observe classes in which students are speaking the language well for the experience they have had and they are enjoying doing it. On the other hand, in some classes grammar analysis and laborious translation still prevail. I will admit that we go out of those classes very disheartened. We are working in the classrooms as counselors with the teachers, we conduct or organize training programs, and we work closely with the college people preparing new teachers to try to overcome and prevent these problems and to accelerate the progress in the quality of teaching.

Q. What particular challenges face the foreign language teacher today?

A. I think one which is always present is the need to do the job better and more effectively. This is particularly true when we have a greater diversity of motivation and intellectual backgrounds in our classes. Another which I think is especially timely now is that of helping to set the record straight concerning the role of foreign languages in our schools, our culture, and in the world.

Specifically, language teachers need to engage their students in activities which are both constructive and which let the rest of the student body, the faculty, and even the locality know that things are happening in the foreign language department.

Another aspect of foreign language teaching which bears reexamination is the role of the textbook. A textbook is intended to be used as a guide. But too many of us allow it to take over as teacher. We must cease conveying the notion that a language exists only between the covers of a book. A language can be an exciting, dynamic, rewarding aspect of every individual's life.

Latin teachers are in the midst of a revolution of styles. The change revolves around the use of more oral Latin in the classroom, not to create speakers of Latin because the skill objective of the language is primarily the ability to read it, but to develop the reading skill more rapidly. It also lends a measure of excitement and motivation to the classes. Those teachers who have made this change usually have halted the loss of students and more often have increased the class size. Those who are fighting to attract students would do well to examine the new methods in this field. ■